

MAESTRO MACKIE IS BLUES-BRAKER

STAND-OUT goalkeeping from Tony Mackie braked Wycombe Wanderers' advance on Wembley dead in its track by the 20th minute of Saturday's Amateur Cup quarter-final at Loakes Park.

Mackie, a major contender for John Swannell's England jersey, re-routed three certain "goals" as St. Albans fell back to withstand Wycombe's predictable push for a quick score.

Then . . . a Saints' goal, and he remained superbly defiant all the way until Wanderers no longer seemed capable of forcing him into play.

By full time, City had tamed the Isthmian League leaders for the second major victory of the season.

Under the Clarence Park floodlights, Wycombe fell to a rare League defeat by three clear goals, when, then, as on Saturday, the Saints' vital and pin-point football caught them with their "guard" down.

But why? The Isthmian table tells an utterly contradictory tale; Wycombe top with 40 points from 25 games and well worth the distinction, St. Albans unconvincingly holding down second place on equal points but having played six extra fixtures.

The answer? There no longer seems much doubt that City's uncompromising formula of brawn, brain and bewildering speed makes them the better team. Nor perhaps from the consistency viewpoint, but certainly on their day.

And, after the setback of City's 26th-minute goal against the run of play, this certainly wasn't Wanderers' day.

They lacked too much in too many departments to fight back into the bout after being floored for the first time.

(The boxing terms may seem out of place, but

By MIKE WHITESMAN : Wycombe W. O, St. Albans C. 2

figures, if exaggerated by the referee's whistle, talk for themselves. Ludicrously there were 54 free kicks, 30 recorded against St. Albans, and 24—mostly in the dying stages—against Wycombe.)

Raids rarely consisted of more than two men, thus enabling City's tight-gripped backrow to eat away any danger near goal; the home defence suffered from either full-back's failure to match his winger for speed; and, in midfield, where it had seemed before the match the issue might be decided, too many passes went adrift.

St. Albans, not afraid to go in over-hard to a tackle, nonetheless had more to offer than questionable tactics. Their movements flowed smoothly with accurate interpassing up and across field, while their frontrunners tore vigorously into attack, often three or four at a time.

It was a somewhat humbling contrast, and

made a mockery of pre-match Cup odds of 10-1 against a St. Albans' triumph at Wembley this season.

Despite City's crunching tackles, Wanderers emerged as the more adventurous starters. But their nervousness near the City goal was hardly helped by the ball's persistent refusal to run their way.

After turning back City's first attack in the fifth minute, Wycombe zoned upfield only for a Hutchinson through ball to catch Tony Horseman offside with a clear run ahead of him.

Eight minutes later, John Maskell took the ball virtually off Bobby Childs' boot when a Ratty-Oxley move on the right promoted glancing danger to Wycombe's goal.

The trend, however, at that time took play towards the gasworks end, where Mackie, a former Leytonstone member, stood between a Wanderers and a quick-fire two- or three-goal lead.

First he managed incredibly to divert a chest-high Hutchinson cross over the bar for a corner in the 15th minute. Next a high, curling lob by Charlie Gale from 30 yards plus grew increasingly more dangerous as it neared goal, but cool covering saw the 'keeper save the situation again.

Superman Mackie completed the hat-trick on 23 minutes, when Horseman backheaded Gale's pass, but the ball was tipped to safety.

Frustrating, yes. Yet there was something far more exasperating on the way in the 26th minute. Childs, taking his cue from Mackie's inspiration, sent over a tricky cross, which eluded Maskell, found its way to a post, and from the rebound was transferred into goal via Oxley's left foot, with Wycombe's defensive covering in shambles.

Former Wealdstone cup finalist, Childs led the City forwards magnificently from there on, causing much consternation among Wycombe's unbalanced defence.

Oxley spent two minutes off-field for treatment on a hand injury near half-time. But he returned in time to join in a 44th minute raid which took a Maskell "special" to detour for a corner.

Now kicking with the wind in their favour, Wycombe's second-half search for an equaliser disappointed. Ever-lacking weight in number, their attacks petered out in the Saints' "box" so often that eventually only long range hopefuls were seeping through to the City 'keeper.

Anthony worked a 50th-minute shot that hugged a post but met with the Maskell treatment as Wanderers recorded another corner.

And nothing the home side produced could match the St. Albans threat four minutes later as Childs headed an attack out of midfield to trigger off a three-shot test for Maskell. Childs himself, Butterfield, then Turley were felled in turn.

Maskell came off his line to parry a solo run by Turley after 56 minutes, before Wanderers returned across the centre line and Hutchinson tried a 20-yard outswerve in vain.

Always lethal on the break, Childs prompted the 63rd-minute movement leading to City's second goal. Butterfield, an equal thorn in Wycombe's side, met his cross heading the ball between 'keeper and post.

Memories of Wanderers' fight-back from two down in the League game at Enfield stirred in the more faithful. But City's lead and superiority seemed unassisted.

Hutton repeated his "out-swerve" with just as little effect three minutes before substitute Keith Blunt replaced him for the final 13 minutes in hopes of pulling out any remaining stops Wanderers could muster.

The switch came too late to be noticed. Butterfield missed a certain goal by heading wide when Maskell stood outpaced, while Delaney cleared his line after a right-wing run by Turley had raised the alarm again.

Fittingly, however, Mackle gave one more encore before the final whistle, flying across goal to cut out an effort by Keith Searle.

Wycombe Wanderers: J. Maskell; I. Reddin, C. Gale, P. Sudbury; D. Delaney, J. Laffey; G. Anthony, B. Baker, A. Horseman, K. Searle, J. Turley (sub: K. Blunt).

St. Albans City: J. Oxley, D. Gibbs, B. Neville; J. Osley, W. Rattie, R. Childs, J. Butterfield, A. Turley (sub: J. Whitehead).

Referee: Mr. A. L. Hart (London). Attendance: 9,520.

Gate receipts: £1,315 3s.